The White Spruce

It Brought Barbara and the Young Forester Together.

By CLARISSA MACKIE.

Barbara Owen parted the flaps of the tent and drank in with delighted eyes the scene before her. The little camp perched almost on the edge of the precipice commanded a magnificent view of the snow topped Cascade range blushing under the first rays of the rising sun.

Barbara went to another tent and called her father. He replied by a yawn, followed by a racking cough. Then she hastened to a third tent and prepared breakfast.

Presently James Owen came forth.

"Hungry as a bear, Bab," he said. "The very smell of that coffee makes me feel ten years younger!"

"I wish the taste of it would make you feel ten times better," said Barbara as she placed the meal on the table.

Barbara chatted brightly during the meal and when it was over completed her household tasks, and, leaving her father swinging in a hammock among the trees with a book between his thin fingers, she disappeared in the forest.

The path she trod was faintly defined by disturbed brown needles, and it followed a course marked by high branched trees, winding in and out, skirting a thicket of dwarfed spruce or leading over a roughly bridged gully to a broad wagon trail.

Before she reached the wagon trail Barbara turned abruptly to the left. Here a giant spruce lifted a naked white shaft high above the surrounding trees of the forest.

Crowding about the spruce was a thicket of young hemlock, ragged and starved for want of light and air. There were an opening in the thicket and a low mound covered with brown needles. Dry eyed and tearless, Barbara sat down in the dimness and tried to face a future that was ominously near—a future when her father should be laid beside her mother in another grave under the tall spruce.

A branch crackled under a firm tread and then another. A man's low whistle came nearer to Barbara's retreat, and presently the man himself came into view among the distant tree trunks. Clad in brown khaki, like herself, with leather puttees, blue flannel shirt open at a strong brown throat and a canvas hat tossed back on a rumpled head, Barbara recognized the young man as one of the foresters patrolling the government's forest reserve wherein their camp was pitched. She had met these men occasionally along the wagon trail, and her father had fallen into conversation with one of the sturdy, bronzed woodsmen and afterward had spoken enthusiastically of the splendid work in which they were engaged.

Barbara watched him with interest, confident that he would not penetrate into the thicket.

When he came to the spruce he stopped suddenly, leaned back and squinted his eyes at the white shaft above his head. He knelt down and examined the young hemlocks and once more drew out his notebook. Barbara, silent and brown, blending with the background of brown trunks, was unobserved until the forester drew his hatchet and cut a deep incision in the spruce tree. The girl was on her feet in an instant.

"Stop!" she cried. "Don't do that!"

The man started and peered as if some brown wood fairy had arisen before his bewildered eyes. Barbara laughed shakily.

"It sounds like a school oration, 'Woodman, spare that tree;' but, you see, my mother is buried here—and—and—the tree marks her grave."

The man had removed his hat and looked at her with respectful attention. Barbara noted that he was young, perhaps thirty, with a crop of thick, sunburned hair and a handsome, well tanned face lighted by keen dark eyes.

"I am very sorry." He hesitated. "I would not do anything to pain you; but, you see, it is my duty to take care of the forest. For the safety of the other and younger trees this dead spruce should come down."

Barbara's eyes filled with tears as she bowed her head against the white trunk of the spruce. "We thought it would be quite undisturbed here in the forest," she sobbed. "There are only three of us—mother here—she died suddenly; father, back at the camp, where he is trying to regain his health in the open, and I. I dare not tell father about the tree. He loves to come here when he is strong enough. The trees sing overhead"—

The forester stepped forward and placed a finger on her sleeve. "Please do not cry," he said awkwardly. "Will you trust me to respect this little spot in the forest and yet do my duty to my employer?"

Barbara looked at his steady eyes and the friendly smile on his clean cut mouth. "Yes," she said slowly; "I will trust you."

"Will you give me your mother's name and the date of her birth and death?" he asked, pulling his notebook out.

Puzzled and a little curious, Barbara gave him the desired information and, with a word of thanks, turned away.

"One week from today you may come again," said the forester gravely.

"Thank you," said Barbara once more, and then she stepped lightly into the trail and was gone.

It was a long week for Barbara Owen. Her father's health improved for the time, and he was anxious to walk in the forest and visit his wife's grave. Barbara invented a dozen excuses to keep him away from the white spruce.

Seven mornings she saw the reflection of the rising sun on the western mountain snows.

On the seventh day she took her father, and together they walked over the narrow trail to where the white spruce had towered. James Owen uttered an astonished cry as he stopped before his wife's grave. Barbara clung to his arm, overcome by a strange emotion. She was glad that the forester was not there to witness it.

The stump of the white spruce arose like a five foot shaft of marble; the bark had been planed off until the wood showed white as satin and as smooth; the top was rounded, and on the flattened side of the stump a hot iron had burned a brief epitaph above Mrs. Owen's resting place. The young hemlocks had been thinned out until they formed a green semicircle about the white shaft.

"Who has done this?" asked Owen huskily.

Barbara told him in a few words of her meeting with the young forester, and after awhile the two walked over to the wagon trail in the direction of the metallic ax blows.

He saw them coming and came to meet them. "I am glad you liked it," he said simply in response to Mr. Owen's warm thanks. "It was better that we should remove the tree in a shipshape manner than permit it to fall of its own accord."

"But the work you did on the stump, young man—it was more than kind of you; we are deeply grateful."

"I had a mother once myself," he replied soberly.

"Come over to the camp and see us, Mr."— said Owen suggestively.

"My name's Charter — Benjamin Charter," said the forester quickly. "You are very kind; I shall be glad to come."

After that day James Owen improved rapidly. There would never be hope of his complete recovery, but a return to even moderate health was an encouragement to his only child. They walked through the woods to the little hemlock circle and felt that here was a spot they might call their own forever.

Their walks often included a search for the foresters engaged in their interesting work of conserving the native trees and guarding against encroaching lumbermen or wandering flocks of sheep or devastating herds of cattle.

Benjamin Charter came to the camp and proved an entertaining companion for father and daughter. He played cards with Mr. Owen or read to the invalid the week old newspapers that came their way. He brought his violin, and Barbara drank in the wonderful melodies woven by the brown fingers and the flashing bow.

The snow caps on the mountains became a little smaller as the season advanced; the dry air was warmer and seemed to give new life to the sick man. Barbara's eyes had a new light in them, and Benjamin Charter's fingers trembled when he played the violin.

Then one day Barbara and her father walked in the forest. They had gone along the wagon trail and were drawing near the working foresters. There was a sound of blows on wood, a silence and then a crashing tearing sound close at hand. Somebody shouted wildly and pushed Barbara and her father out of harm's way, somebody who was too late himself to spring from under the falling tree and so was caught beneath the weight of heavy green branches.

A tree had fallen in an unexpected direction, and Benjamin Charter's quickness had probably saved Mr. Owen and his daughter from injury, if not death. When the tree was removed by the score of laborers that sprang into view Charter was quite unconscious.

He was carried into the camp on the precipice, and one of the men rode madly away to the distant settlement for a doctor. In the meantime Barbara and her father did what they could. The forester opened his eyes upon their anxious faces.

"I am glad you are safe," he said feebly.

"You saved my worthless life and Barbara's precious one," said Owen brokenly. "I wish I could reward you, Charter. You have been a friend indeed to me."

"I wish you would give me Barbara," said Charter, with more strength. "I haven't got very much, but I can take care of her and make her comfortable."

"What do you say, Bab?" asked her father.

Barbara's face, bent above the injured man's, was sufficient answer.

"You needn't wait till I'm gone to be happy," suggested Mr. Owen after the doctor had come and pronounced Charter's injuries to be slight—more painful than dangerous. "You can get married as soon as you are well enough to hobble around and find a minister."

"Thank you, sir," said Charter. His arm was about Barbara as she knelt beside his cot.

"I suppose you know who you're marrying," resumed Owen, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Barbara Owen, the sweetest girl in the world," returned Charter promptly.

Owen laughed softly. "Barbara Owen, daughter of James Herkimer Owen, the copper king," he said dryly.

"I can't leave the forest," said the forester when he had recovered from his surprise.

"And I don't want to leave it," said Barbara happily.

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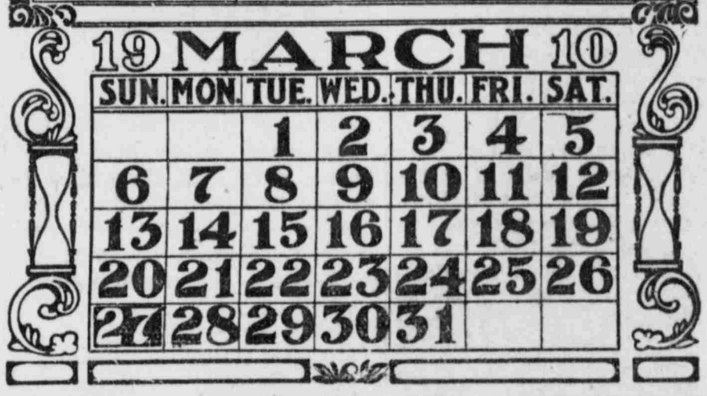

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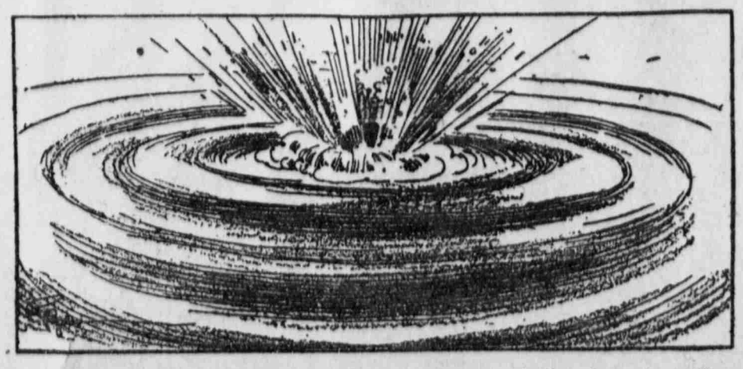

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